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DE RUEHPS #0734/01 2482002

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FM USOFFICE PRISTINA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6457

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRISTINA 000734

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL UNMIK VI

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: PRESIDENT SEJDIU NOMINATED FOR POSITION OF
LDK PARTY PRESIDENT, TENSIONS GROW WITH OPPOSITION PDK

REF: PRISTINA 696

Classified By: COM Tina S. Kaidanow for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After a fast moving series of events over the Labor Day weekend, the influential presidency of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), Kosovo's largest party, decided September 5 to nominate President Fatmir Sejdiu as its candidate for the position of party president. Sejdiu is seen by many as a unifying figure within the LDK and Kosovo at large. Sejdiu will go head-to-head with the divisive and combative former Assembly speaker Nexhat Daci, also a candidate, as the LDK begins a two-month process to select its next leader to replace former President Ibrahim Rugova, who passed away in January 2006. Sejdiu's candidacy has the virtue of providing a single, integrating force within the party to oppose Daci, a role that no other LDK figure has the stature or support to play. UNMIK has also recognized the benefits to party (and ultimately Kosovo) stability by finding no legal obstacle to his candidacy.

2, (C) Summary, cont. Nevertheless, there may be some rough and tumble politics ahead as opposition PDK party leader (and Unity Team member) Hashim Thaci uses the pretext of the Sejdiu LDK candidacy and the alleged "politicization" of the Kosovar presidency to threaten his own withdrawal from the negotiating team. COM made clear in a pointed phone call to Thaci that he would be held accountable for any cracks in the Unity Team facade. UNMIK convened Contact Group, EU and OSCE reps late on Sept. 5 to solicit support for its legal ruling on Sejdiu's ability to run for the LDK presidency; despite some anxiety over the impact of events on the Unity Team, CG reps agreed that the interpretation of the constitutional framework was correct and that Thaci should hear a firm common line, warning him against doing anything precipitous. End Summary.

Sejdiu is Candidate for LDK President

¶3. (C) The presidency of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) decided in its meeting on September 5 to nominate Fatmir Sejdiu, the president of Kosovo and the LDK's former secretary general, as its candidate for the vacated post of

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party president. Kole Berisha, LDK second vice president and current president of the Kosovo Assembly, told Post that the presidency approved Sejdiu's candidacy with 13 votes in favor, 3 against and 2 abstentions. In a statement issued by the LDK-affiliated Kosovo Information Center shortly after the meeting, President Sejdiu -- who was not present for the deliberations -- said he would accept the LDK presidency's nomination.

¶4. (C) Berisha privately described the meeting as difficult and tense. He noted that several presidency members, commonly associated with the late president's controversial security advisor Rame Maraj and now supporting the candidacy of Nexhat Daci (including Adem Salihaj, Salih Cacaj, Shekfi Gashi, Lulezim Zeneli and Sejde Tolaj), opposed the idea of nominating a single LDK presidency candidate. Berisha also noted the abstention of Alush Gashi, a presidency member and head of the LDK caucus in the Kosovo Assembly, who harbored (in vain) his own aspirations at the chairmanship. Another potential candidate for party president, Kosovo Deputy Prime Minister Lutfi Haziri, apparently also quietly sought party support, but, like Gashi, found none among his elder colleagues.

¶5. (C) Eqrem Kryeziu, LDK first vice president and mayor of Prizren, told the media after the meeting that the presidency was compelled to present its candidate after Daci, who was ousted as Assembly speaker in March 2006 (and is now under investigation for questionable spending practices during his tenure), presented his candidacy months ago and campaigned both in and outside of Kosovo. Kryeziu also stressed that the LDK presidency faced strong pressure from its membership to present a unified candidate for the upcoming internal elections. (Note: Daci made public his candidacy in an

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interview with VOA Albanian Service during a June 2006 visit to the U.S., shortly after his ouster from the Assembly speakership. Thanks to younger party members Zeneli and Tolaj, Daci has enjoyed the support of a segment of the LDK youth chapter, whose events throughout Kosovo have served as staging grounds for his campaign. Daci's cause has also been joined by key LDK diaspora chapters in Sweden and elsewhere. Other Daci supporters include senior LDK figure Adem Salihaj, former deputy prime minister before also being ousted in March 2006; Salihaj evidently joined forces with other party members sidelined in the March timeframe, including Rame Maraj, to challenge the LDK "old guard" in today's presidency meeting. After the meeting, Salihaj complained to the media about alleged "violations of internal LDK rules and imposition of a preferred candidate.")

¶6. (C) The LDK presidency's decision comes on the eve of the launch of the party's two-month long internal elections process scheduled to begin September 7. Local LDK branches will now meet and decide whom to support; the process will culminate with the party's general assembly, likely to be held in mid-November, at which the new party president will be elected. The seat of the LDK president has been vacant since February 23, 2005, when the late Kosovo President and the first and only president of the LDK, Ibrahim Rugova, resigned as party president to meet a constitutional requirement prohibiting the president of Kosovo from holding other political office. Adhering to the same constitutional requirement, Sejdiu resigned as LDK secretary-general on May 25, 2006, but nevertheless remained a member of the LDK presidency.

Opposition PDK Uses LDK Events to Seek Political Gain,
Threaten Walkout of Unity Team

¶7. (C) The LDK presidency nomination of Sejdiu was in part the result of an UNMIK legal judgement, communicated early September 5 to Sejdiu by SRSG Ruecker and PDSRSG Steve Schook, that Kosovo's constitutional framework did not

prohibit Sejdiu running as a candidate for the party president, though he would not be permitted ultimately to hold both positions. UNMIK's considered decision, however, did not preclude opposition PDK party leader Hashim Thaci from using the prospect of a Sejdiu candidacy to cry foul and threaten a walkout from the multi-party Unity Team, scheduled to resume technical negotiations on status-related issues in Vienna September 7 and 8. Thaci -- who has long aspired to attain the post of Kosovo prime minister and believes that an alliance with the LDK's Daci is the quickest way to get there -- asserted aggressively in conversations with Schook, Ruecker and others that Sejdiu's actions were "politicizing" Kosovo's presidency and consequently affecting the unity of the negotiating team, and that he would have "no choice" but to withdraw from the team if Sejdiu and the LDK proceeded as planned.

¶8. (C) UNMIK convened Contact Group, EU, and OSCE reps the afternoon of September 5 to review the bidding and seek support for its legal interpretation of the Kosovo constitutional framework. Despite anxiety among some of those present over the prospect of cracks in the Unity Team as a result of Thaci's threats, all agreed that a literal reading of the framework provided no grounds to prevent Sejdiu from running -- though not to use the office of the Kosovo Presidency for campaign purposes, nor in fact to campaign in any way using his status as Kosovo President. Many in the room agreed that LDK unity was an overriding imperative, and that Sejdiu was in all probability the only candidate who could with certainty win over the highly problematic Daci. After some debate on this point, CG and other reps decided that, in the context of their support for UNMIK's legal decision and notwithstanding different political judgements about the wisdom of Sejdiu's candidacy, they needed to be firm and clear with Thaci that he would be held accountable for any move to undermine the Unity Team. COM communicated this point to Thaci in a phone call, noting that Sejdiu's candidacy was fully in keeping with UNMIK's

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legal judgement and that Thaci needed to think very carefully before taking any move that he could not reverse. Thaci was non-committal, claiming that his response would be keyed to Sejdiu's action and calling UNMIK's decision "illegitimate," though it was clear he understood the message.

Comment

¶9. (C) We cannot preclude the possibility that Thaci will make the rash move of quitting the negotiating team and withdrawing his support for the overall negotiating process -- a purely political action motivated by his desire to influence events in the LDK in favor of Nexhet Daci and further the PDK's prospects of entering government before the next Kosovo elections. He has made threats before to abandon the Team, but the LDK's decision to run Sejdiu for party president may give Thaci just the excuse he thinks he needs to do what he's been toying with for weeks if not months: seize on the difficult decentralization and other status-related decisions ahead -- which have already raised the volume of local criticism leveled at the Unity Team -- to abandon ship and join the negative chorus. Our soundings indicate that he does not have full support for this course among his party membership, but Thaci takes little counsel from anyone but himself. Still, we are using all avenues available within the PDK, including direct intervention with Thaci, to drive our points home.

¶10. (C) Comment, cont. The Sejdiu candidacy is not ideal by any means, but it is, in our judgement, probably the only way the party leadership could be fully sure of combatting the encroaching Daci tide. (This is an opinion strongly shared by many local analysts outside the LDK, including among others Unity Team Coordinator Blerim Shala.) LDK party leaders remember the agony they went through only months ago in ousting Daci and other key opponents of reform, and wanted

to be sure they did not face the same challenge again. A close reading of Kosovo's constitutional framework also made it clear there was no legal prohibition against Sejdiu running. In this sensitive environment, we need to reaffirm the limits UNMIK has imposed on Sejdiu in terms of his candidacy and the choice he will ultimately face in deciding which position to hold, but not allow outside elements -- namely Thaci and the PDK -- to drive the agenda for their own political gain. We will continue to report on developments over the next few days as the rough and tumble (both within the LDK and in the wider political sphere) unfolds.

¶11. (U) U.S. Office Pristina clears this cable in its entirety for release to U.N. Special Envoy for Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari.

KAIDANOW